

Soft Brexit, soft landing? Interpreting Labour's Brexit strategy

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Will the decision to back a soft Brexit hurt Labour's prospects in the upcoming election further, or would it help? And what would it do to Labour's prospects in the long run? [Ben Margulies](#) looks at the evidence and explains how Labour can avoid becoming irrelevant and how it can recover its position as the leading party of the left.



After an extended period of division and confusion, it seems Labour may finally have picked a stance on Brexit. On April 25, Keir Starmer, the shadow Brexit secretary, announced that Labour would prioritise maintaining the ... benefits of the single market and customs union," and would unilaterally guaranteed currently settled EU citizens in the UK the right to remain. In effect, Labour has opted for "soft Brexit," which would keep most of the trade and regulatory architecture of the Union intact. The price for that – as the Conservatives will quickly point out – will be abandoning Theresa May's [main Brexit goals](#), among them no more EU courts and no more free movement of people.

Why did Labour choose a soft Brexit? Simply put, because most Labour voters did – [between 63 and 71 per cent, actually](#). Although Labour's heartlands in the Midlands and North of England voted to Leave, according to the British Elections Study Panel, nearly 70 per cent of Labour voters outside Greater London and Scotland voted to stay in the EU. Even in the North, [the total was 57 per cent](#). YouGov's exit poll [found](#) Labour voters only slightly less committed to Remain than the Liberal Democrats' (65 per cent to 68 per cent). And the party membership wants to attract Remain voters, not Leavers – a poll published in the *Telegraph* [found that](#) the nearly 80 per cent of members who backed Corbyn in 2016, and about half of those who backed challenger Owen Smith, wanted to appeal to other parties' voters rather than Tory/UKIP ones.

Regarding negotiation strategies, a YouGov poll from September found that 47 per cent of Labour voters wanted Labour to "accept Brexit but seek to maintain a close relationship with the EU after we leave." Ipsos MORI [discovered](#) in October 2016 "that no fewer than 61 per cent of 2015 election Labour voters believe that Britain should prioritise 'access to the single market' and only 28 per cent 'having control over immigration'". Another YouGov [poll](#), from early 2017, found that:

- only 18 per cent of 2015 Labour voters favoured the free-trade-only deal Theresa May seems to be advocating;
- 25 per cent want something like what Starmer is now offering;
- 18 per cent want a second referendum;
- 15 per cent want to reverse Brexit.

Thus, the soft or no Brexit options win the support of 58 per cent of Labour voters.



Will choosing a side in the Brexit stakes help or hurt Labour? In the terms of this election campaign, the answer depends on how willing voters are to give Labour a hearing. With Jeremy Corbyn at the helm, they seem singularly unwilling. If Labour is able to get a coherent “soft Brexit” message out, however, it might stem some losses to the Liberal Democrats, who are trying hard to position themselves as the party of Remain. But it will do little to defend Labour from [tactical-voting](#) initiatives designed to target pro-Brexit Labour MPs, or MPs who [oppose a vote](#) on the Brexit deal.

In the longer term, that positioning could be very important. Brexit is fast becoming its own cleavage in British society – a permanent social divide that structures identity, organisation and political choice. These cleavages determine the shape and purpose of political parties, which advance the interests of one part of society or the other. There are almost always multiple cleavages, and indeed there are in Britain – there is still a socioeconomic left and right, and there are divisions over other social issues like law and order or the environment. In Scotland, the major division is between nationalist and those who want to preserve the Union.

[In a recent paper](#), Hooghe and Marks argue that a cleavage is developing between those who believe in and benefit from “European integration, immigration, and universalist-particularistic values” and those who favour “protection of national (and western) values, defense of national sovereignty, opposition to immigration, and trade scepticism.” *The Economist* [made the same case](#) in an issue last year. This is sometimes rendered as a battle between globalisation or cosmopolitanism on one side, and nationalism or protectionism on the other

This cleavage encompasses a wide variety of issues. It is a contest over values – between individualism and collectivism, nationalism and internationalism, universal rights versus national rights. It is a battle between contrasting identities, much like the centre-periphery cleavage in Scotland. And it partly enfold the traditional class cleavage, as it is the working and lower-middle classes which lose the most from globalisation. The Brexit cleavage is thus inescapable for any party wishing to remain relevant to contemporary politics.

Labour would probably prefer not to take a side in this battle. Its electoral coalition is starkly divided over the issues. Jeremy Corbyn has tried [to promote](#) a more traditional stance as a left-wing party favouring redistribution and public services. But the truth is, if it takes no position on this cleavage, Labour will cease to be relevant and could die. Social-democratic parties [are already in trouble](#) because, within the neoliberal consensus, they can do so little for lower-income voters. If they fail to take a stance on the most important bundle of issues in contemporary Europe, they risk becoming still more irrelevant, losing voters to protectionists on the one hand and the pro-globalisation liberal camp on the other, which is precisely what happened to the Socialist Party in France.

Labour already faces a similar problem in Scotland. There, the left-right divide has been occluded not by Brexit, [by a classic centre-periphery divide](#), one between nationalist (who portray themselves as both pro-Europe and social democratic) and pro-Union parties. Labour has struggled to position itself on this cleavage; it is Unionist, but has no

appealing policy to offer on that subject that would distinguish itself from the Scottish Conservatives. They have proposed federalism, [but vaguely and grudgingly](#), and federalism has long been a Liberal Democrat policy anyway. As a result, Scottish Labour has become mostly irrelevant. In the meantime, the Conservatives, with a more definite position on the centre-periphery cleavage and more popular leadership, [are surging](#) in Scotland.

So Labour has to pick a side. And the best shot it has for the future is to pick the side of liberalism, because that's where the party's voters are. Hooghe and Marks point out, parties are stubborn creatures, with historic identities and commitments; they do not like abandoning these identities and positions, which is why new parties tend to arise when new cleavages do. Labour does not want to admit to itself that it is, for the most part, a middle-class progressive party, and that it has little future as a party of a declining white fraction of the working classes.

If Labour does not embrace a position on the globalization-communitarian divide, it risks becoming irrelevant, as another "progressive" party will do it for them. But Labour is already far larger than the Lib Dems or the Greens – its main rivals for the anti-Brexit vote; if it takes a firm stance, it can recover its position as the leading party of the left and perhaps secure its future. This may be the only way Labour can survive the Brexit years intact. Perhaps more importantly, a strong cosmopolitan Labour Party can help keep liberalism itself strong and healthy. [The alternatives are not pretty](#).

About the Author

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